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**The Role of the First Lady**



*Jacqueline Kennedy visited the Taj Mahal in Agra, India, in 1962.*

By Carl Sferrazza Anthony

*Since Martha Washington in the 18th century, first ladies of the United States have held a highly visible yet undefined position in the U.S. government. The author describes how several first ladies fulfilled this unique role, according to their own interests and the times they lived in.*

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The role of the first lady, the U.S. president’s spouse, has evolved from fashion trendsetter and hostess of White House dinners to a more substantive position. While there have been diverging views on the roles of women in society, the first lady is still a role model for American women. One of the highest-profile jobs in the U.S. government comes with no official duties, no paycheck, and almost limitless possibilities. The first lady can influence the president and can even exercise a degree of political power over policy and legislation.

Having a “first lady” has been part of American life since the founding of the presidency in 1789. Although the United States had just recently won its independence from Great Britain following the American Revolution, the first president’s wife, Martha Washington (1789-1797), was treated by the elite of the first capital cities of New York and Philadelphia as if she were a “lady” of the British royal court. She was referred to in public as “Lady Washington,” her popular nickname from the Revolutionary War era.

Her immediate successor, Abigail Adams (1797-1801), had also earned some fame of her own during the Revolution for her highly political opinions expressed in letters to her husband and other legislators. During her husband’s presidency, she was criticized as “Mrs. President” for so publicly voicing her politically partisan views.

Fusing elements of the ceremonial and political, the ebullient Dolley Madison (1809-1817) firmly established this new national archetype. Dolley Madison risked her own well-being to remove iconic treasures of the fledgling United States from the burning White House during the War of 1812. Her heroism made her a legend and identified her in the public imagination as an ideal “presidentress.” Dolley Madison dressed in elegant fashions to attract newspaper coverage yet remained democratically accessible to all citizens. She led an effort for orphans and sought equal access for women in public places from Supreme Court hearings to oyster houses. She created the standard by which all of her successors were judged until the time of the global humanitarian Eleanor Roosevelt (1933-1945).

The public expectation for such a position was so established by the mid-19th century that when Harriet Lane (1857-1861) served as hostess for her uncle, the only bachelor president, James Buchanan, a new title was used for her that covered both presidential spouses and other women relatives who served as hostesses for those presidents who were widowed or single — first lady. The title was first printed in 1860 in *Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper*.

**A Chronicle of Firsts**

The achievements and activities of first ladies who served between Dolley Madison and Eleanor Roosevelt did not attract great public attention but were often notable. Julia Tyler (1844-1845) was the first to be photographed and have her image publicly distributed in an engraving. Mary Lincoln (1861-1865) was the first enmeshed in controversy and was the subject of newspaper editorials. Lucy Hayes (1877-1881) was the first exploited for commercial merchandising. Frances Cleveland (1886-1889 and 1893-1897) was the first to issue a press release, which denied a whispered scandal about her private life. Helen “Nellie” Taft (1909-1913) was the first to ride in her husband’s inaugural parade, declare her support for women’s suffrage, and earn public credit for successfully lobbying for federal legislation. Edith Wilson (1915-1921), in the context of protecting her husband as he recovered from a stroke, became the first to assume management of the presidency, prompting many to consider her something of the first “first lady president.” Florence Harding (1921-1923) was the first to vote, deliver speeches, and publicly declare her sense of obligation to intervene in government affairs affecting specific constituencies, such as veterans, working women, and humane societies.



*First Lady Barbara Bush reads to preschoolers in New York in 1990.*

Eleanor Roosevelt’s husband, President Franklin Roosevelt, had polio, a disease that prevented his walking and thus his freedom of movement to inspect various conditions around the country. Mrs. Roosevelt assumed this essential role, which she said was like being his “eyes and ears.” In addition to her duties as first lady, Eleanor Roosevelt wrote a monthly magazine column and a daily newspaper column, lectured, hosted a weekly radio show, and authored several books. She was an international figure who had influence on the world stage.

Her immediate successors, Bess Truman (1945-1953) and Mamie Eisenhower (1953-1961), were more traditional hostesses and charity patrons. Jacqueline Kennedy (1961-1963) added the roles of historian and decorator as she presided over the historic restoration and preservation of the White House and other public sites, and she was a champion of American arts and culture. Global fascination with Mrs. Kennedy intensified because she spoke several languages and visited South American, Asian, and European nations. In conjunction with the rise of television and the growing movement for women’s equality in all spheres of life, there was a public expectation at the time that first ladies address current issues, tailored to their strengths, ambitions, expertise, and interests.

**A More Substantive Role**

Lady Bird Johnson (1963-1969) became a pioneer of the growing environmental protection and urban renewal movements, fostering federal legislation that sought to restore public highways to their natural appearances and to remove visually marring sites.

Betty Ford (1974-1977) stirred controversy by her frank discussion of political issues that affected women, registering her support for the Supreme Court decision upholding a woman’s right to choose abortion and lobbying state legislatures to pass the Equal Rights Amendment. When Mrs. Ford disclosed her own breast cancer, she helped eradicate the taboo against discussing the health problem that affected millions of women.

Rosalynn Carter (1977-1981) testified before Congress to aid people with chronic mental health problems, led a global relief effort for Cambodian refugees, and held substantive meetings with Central and South American political and military leaders as a representative of the president.

Nancy Reagan (1981-1989) led a campaign to dissuade school-aged children from using illegal drugs, helped monitor her husband’s appointments to ensure that his advisors remained loyal to his policies, and encouraged President Reagan’s friendship with Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev, which eventually led to an arms reduction treaty.

Barbara Bush (1989-1993) led an effort to reduce adult illiteracy, believing it to be an underlying cause for many social problems.

In 2001, Hillary Clinton (1993-2001) became the only former first lady elected to public office, the U.S. Senate. As first lady, she headed a health care reform effort to provide insurance to all Americans. In the more traditional role of first lady, she created an outdoor sculpture garden and displayed contemporary American art in the historic rooms of the White House. In 2008, Hillary Clinton ran for president of the United States and nearly won her party’s nomination.

Laura Bush (2001-present) began her tenure as first lady by encouraging childhood reading but expanded her influence into a broad range of issues, including heart disease in women, aiding at-risk young men with positive-oriented goals, increasing federal support for libraries, and teacher training. She also made independent trips to Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, promoting equal access to health care and education for women. Notably, she spoke out in support of persecuted Buddhist monks in the nation of Myanmar.

The first ladies’ travels, their causes, and activities are newsworthy events in the United States. Because of their relation to the president, they are political celebrities and have been able from earliest times to use their position to influence styles and advocate for social and political causes.

*The opinions expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. government.*

<http://www.america.gov/st/usg-english/2008/September/20080926162204naneerg0.8945886.html>

1. What do you think is the role of the first lady? Explain.
2. Describe Martha Washington’s duties as the first first lady.
3. Give two examples of causes or programs supported by first ladies and who supported them.
4. Name and describe a first lady who has caused some controversy (and what it was about).
5. Have any first ladies established precedents (firsts)? Give and support an example.
6. How has the role of the first lady changed over time? Write a FIVE sentence response by using reason, details and facts.